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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD (PARTIAL)* OF THE 334th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 4 October 1996, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. BELEMBAOGO

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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GE.96-18501 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Mauritius (continued) (HRI/CORE/1/Add.60; CRC/C/3/Add.36; CRC/C.12/WP.6 (list of issues); written replies by the Government of Mauritius (informal document distributed in English only))

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Mauritius resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. The CHAIRPERSON invited members of the Committee to put any further questions concerning the section of the list of issues relating to health before taking up the last two sections concerning education, leisure and cultural activities, and special protection measures.

3. Mr. MOMBESHORA, referring to the section on health, asked what the results of the National Plan of Action on health had been and what problems might have been encountered in implementing it. He also hoped that the delegation of Mauritius would explain the epidemiological pattern of malnutrition, particularly from the point of view of the factors underlying it. Noting that the promotion of breast-feeding raised difficulties and that prenatal and post-natal clinics were heavily frequented, he expressed the opinion that information campaigns should focus on those establishments in particular.

4. Going on to the section on education, he welcomed the fact that education was free for everyone; on the other hand, it was regrettable that there were apparently two systems depending on family wealth. He would like to know the delegation's opinion in that regard and also whether education was oriented towards job opportunities.

5. Miss MASON noted that the report dealt in detail with the health of infants and children but did not mention the situation of adolescents, with the exception of the disabled. She would therefore like further information in that respect. In connection with education, she noted the importance attached to the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) and inquired whether competition was as fierce at the secondary level with the consequences that sometimes entailed, such as teenage suicides. She also asked for details of cases of teenage pregnancy and abortions. Lastly, she asked when the community-based rehabilitation programme for disabled children had come into force and what its results were.

6. Referring to education, she noted from paragraph 103 of the report that about 6 per cent of primary school children left the education system virtually illiterate and 20 per cent functionally illiterate. She inquired whether a remedial education system existed and asked for details on the situation of such children during the three years between primary school and the minimum age of admission to employment. She asked whether they were not liable to become street children or go to swell the ranks of the exploited child labour recorded by the UNICEF office in Mauritius. Were physical and psychological tests carried out on those children to determine the causes of

under-achievement? Factors such as family problems or poor sight or hearing often had to be taken into consideration. Without a comprehensive study of the factors of under-achievement, the implementation of the Master Plan for Education mentioned in paragraph 156 of the report would not alone be sufficient to reduce child labour.

7. Mrs. BADRAN wondered whether geographical differences in the incidence of ill-health, due especially to anaemia and malnutrition, were not the result of regional inequalities in respect of health infrastructures. Some UNICEF reports also referred to regional disparities with regard to water supply, with its impact on the frequency of hepatitis cases. With regard to education, she, too, was concerned about the existence of a parallel system to which the children of underprivileged families had no access, which probably explained why half of the pupils failed to obtain the Certificate of Primary Education. Malnutrition and fierce competition among pupils probably also had a part to play. The system would certainly need to be thoroughly overhauled in order really to reduce the rate of illiteracy.

8. Mrs. SARDENBERG said she was afraid that granting maternity leave only to women who had worked for more than a year in the same company was discriminatory. With reference to education, she asked whether private schools were subject to any sort of control. She would also like details of the content of the new course on human values, in view of the extreme diversity of Mauritian society. Lastly, she would like to know whether sex education was part of the school syllabus.

9. Mr. PEEROO (Mauritius) said that abortion was illegal in Mauritius, which meant that women resorting to clandestine abortions endangered their lives. The idea of legalization was on the agenda but had not yet come to anything, since religious feeling was deeply rooted in Mauritian society. The health services - hospitals, clinics and community services - were uniformly distributed throughout the territory and health care was the same for everyone. Piped water was routinely chlorinated. Problems could arise when reserves were at their lowest, particularly in December, but steps were taken to remedy them.

10. Where maternity leave was concerned, he confirmed that the benefits provided by labour legislation applied only to women who had worked for a year in the same company. However, the Government was aware of the problems which might arise and the Labour Advisory Council had considered some 50 proposals to amend the law in that respect.

11. With regard to the education system, he said that children who did not obtain their Certificate of Primary Education were steered towards vocational and technical establishments, the numbers of which, as well as of the students attending them, were increasing every year. As for private education, the Government tended to regard it as a necessary evil. It was true that there was stiff competition in the education system which put pressure on families. The Government took the problem very seriously, but it should be noted that the whole world was moving towards increased competition which was reflected in the education system. Private schools did not come under government control, but the Ministry of Education was entitled to inspect their syllabuses. A Private Secondary School Authority existed which was responsible for monitoring semi-private schools, i.e. schools run privately

but where the teachers were paid directly by the State so as to keep education free. Generally speaking, the Government endeavoured to put all schools on the same footing so as to make up for the poor results recorded in some regions. Referring to the human values course, he said that the intention was to encourage understanding among the different elements which made up the population of Mauritius by inculcating into children the bases of the island's cultures and religions. Despite the controversy which had accompanied its development, it had become an integral part of the syllabus.

12. Mr. SEETULSINGH (Mauritius) said that the new Government, elected in December 1995, was determined to improve the situation in all the areas mentioned by the members of the Committee. With reference to health, he recalled that there was no famine in Mauritius although the population's diet had not always met European or international standards in terms of proteins or vitamins. Malnutrition should be put down to economic difficulties, Mauritius being an overpopulated country which depended on its imports to feed itself. The campaign to promote breast-feeding was proceeding, but the results had not yet been evaluated.

13. Where education was concerned, it must be observed that all countries had an elitist system to some extent. The question was whether to level down or to try and train some specialists capable of contributing to the country's development. Possibilities for discussion on the subject were endless. In any case, the Government was determined to improve the quality of the education system and combat under-achievement. Children who did not obtain their Certificate of Primary Education were taken in hand by the Industrial and Vocational Training Board, which steered them towards technical careers.

14. He said that in Mauritius all children were vaccinated against tropical diseases, while physical and psychological tests identified the causes of failure in primary school. The Ministry of Education was envisaging introducing nine years of schooling instead of six so that all children, whatever their level of development, could follow the syllabus. It also intended to force children who did not obtain satisfactory results to repeat whereas, until the present time, all pupils without exception had gone on automatically to the next class. It was also true that urban areas had better school facilities than the countryside, but the authorities were planning measures to rectify the disparity. The Government also intended to carry out studies to ascertain whether there was a link between poor school performance and malnutrition. UNICEF could be of assistance in that area.

15. Mr. MOMBESHORA said that, according to information furnished by one non-governmental organization (NGO), the infant mortality rate in Mauritius had been 18.1 per thousand in 1991 and 18.4 per thousand in 1992 and there was every indication that it would continue to rise, since there was a high proportion of teenage mothers-to-be. The phenomenon was apparently due to the fact that young people were unfamiliar with methods of contraception. He would like to have some clarification on the matter and on the results of the National Plan of Action for the Survival, Development and Protection of Children and on child labour. He asked whether public programmes existed to ensure that there was no deterioration in the diet of women and children.

16. Miss MASON referred to the conclusions of a study by the UNICEF office in Mauritius according to which children as unskilled workers were more at risk from labour accidents and were vulnerable to ill-treatment on the part of their employer. She would like to know the results of the Master Plan for Education which aimed at restricting child labour. She also asked whether working children benefited from social welfare.

17. She requested more information about the fact that many primary-school teachers gave their pupils additional private tuition. She considered that the Government should set up an inspection system for teachers and investigate the reasons for so many of them being unable to complete the syllabus within the prescribed deadline. She also asked what the proportions of male and female teachers were and what percentage of the Mauritian population was made up of children.

18. Mrs. BADRAN wondered whether teachers did not deliberately fail to complete the syllabus in order to be able to earn a second income from private tuition. She asked what a teacher earned compared with a doctor, a social worker or a lawyer and whether there were plans to improve teachers' salaries in order to remedy the problem. She also wished to know whether school meals existed.

19. Mrs. EUFEMIO asked whether there was any continuity between pre-primary and primary education, so as not to disadvantage children who had not attended pre-primary schools. She inquired whether Mauritius had educational programmes on radio and television and whether the fact that there were only 218 radios and 360 television sets per 1,000 inhabitants was not detrimental to that type of education. Did the schools inculcate human values, such as peace and tolerance, from the pre-primary level upwards? According to the Mauritian delegation, pre-primary schools were not frequently inspected; she asked how their quality could be improved in that case.

20. Mrs. KARP asked whether sex education was compulsory at school, in order to prevent teenage pregnancies and AIDS. She asked for details about the training of teachers in that regard.

21. Mr. SEETULSINGH (Mauritius) said that he would like to know which NGO had reported an increase in the infant mortality rate so that the authorities could have access to the information furnished. With reference to the UNICEF study on child labour, he confirmed, as the report stated, that some children had to leave school in order to work. However, the labour inspectorate was doing everything in its power to put an end to such practices.

22. He did not know whether it was common for teachers to give private lessons to their pupils in order to complete the syllabus, but he recognized in general that it was a practice to be deplored even if it could not be prohibited. It was true that primary-school teachers were less well paid than doctors, since they earned approximately 60 per cent of the salary of doctors in Government employment. There were no school meals, but milk, bread and dried fruit were distributed in the primary schools. The authorities were also making efforts to monitor private kindergartens more carefully and gave scholarships to children from underprivileged families.

23. He said that a household in Mauritius comprised four persons on average and that each household had a radio or a television set. Radio and television teaching programmes existed in Mauritius for children and adults alike. Those programmes could replace private tuition and covered various subjects, such as chemistry, physics, mathematics and biology. The Institute of Education, which trained teachers, monitored the programmes. He admitted that insufficient stress was placed on human values in school syllabuses, but teaching of the principles of peace and tolerance was a prominent feature. Sex education was not compulsory at school, but he agreed that it should be. In that regard, he pointed out that many schools came under religious authorities.

24. Lastly, he said that children accounted for only one third of the population because of the success of the birth-control programme set up to restrict population growth. The ageing of the population as a result of increased life expectancy was already beginning to affect public finance, but the problem was fortunately attenuated by the continued existence of the extended family.

The meeting was suspended at 4.25 p.m. and resumed at 4.35 p.m.

25. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee to make their concluding observations and recommendations.

26. Mrs. BADRAN stressed the need to decentralize the system for the coordination, follow-up and evaluation of activities concerning children, while differentiating and reinforcing its three components which were the ministries, the National Children's Council and the inter-ministerial committees. She also recommended filling the gap between the areas best supplied with infrastructure and services and the most underprivileged areas. The authorities should endeavour to help the ever-larger numbers of working women by planning to introduce nursery services and encourage the opening of child-care facilities at the workplace.

27. Mrs. EUFEMIO thought that it was necessary to update the 1994 statistics on the situation in Mauritius and provide data on aspects which had not been dealt with at that time. An action plan defining the population groups targeted and the amount of funds needed in each sector should be prepared on the basis of the results recorded. The central and local authorities should also itemize their expenditures, permitting better control over the use of their resources, and identify the sectors where shortfalls could be offset by international aid.

28. She welcomed the intention of the Mauritian delegation to study the possibility of establishing a post of ombudsman to safeguard the rights of children and to envisage solutions other than legal measures in cases of sexual abuse. She proposed that a study should be made of how account could be taken of religious differences in the implementation of the Convention.

29. Miss MASON asked a series of questions to which, she suggested, the delegation of Mauritius should reply in writing at a later date. She would like clarification concerning the harmonization of the Juvenile Offenders' Act and the Child Protection Act, the role of probationary officers, the extent of

drug addiction and arrangements for the detention of child drug addicts, etc. She also recommended that the Mauritian authorities should consider easing the provision for the early release of delinquents and adopting legislation for the prevention of sexual tourism. She would also like further information on the Master Plan for Education. Lastly, she recommended that the Government should pay more attention to the underprivileged area of Rodrigues Island particularly in terms of social assistance.

30. Mrs. SARDENBERG suggested that the Mauritian authorities should carry out a children's census and adapt their policies in accordance with the results obtained, taking account of the child's best interests. She also recommended a public discussion of the rights of the child with the participation of all sectors of society, including children themselves.

31. Mrs. KARP stressed the need to create a favourable climate for children in cases of family violence and sexual abuse, and to ensure appropriate training for police officers and magistrates in that regard. She would also encourage the authorities to make sex education compulsory in schools, as part of the child's right to information. Lastly, she hoped there would be a public debate in Mauritius on the rights of the child as a result of the Committee's recommendations and the summary records of its meetings, as well as the reports submitted by the delegation of Mauritius.

32. Mr. KOLOSOV said that he shared Mrs. Karp's hopes and suggested that the authorities should, for example, organize a television debate covering the Convention, the rights of the child and the work of the Committee.

33. The CHAIRPERSON said that the concluding observations and recommendations of the Committee would be transmitted to the Government of Mauritius once they were complete and had been officially adopted.

34. Mr. PEEROO (Mauritius) undertook to provide all the clarifications requested and expressed great interest in the suggestions and recommendations of the Committee.

35. The CHAIRPERSON welcomed the dialogue initiated with the delegation of Mauritius and noted that a periodic report would be done from Mauritius five years after the initial report of which it had just completed its consideration.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 5.10 p.m.